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SUBJECT: GREECE: 18-DAY PRISON STRIKES END WITH GOG
ANNOUNCEMENT TO RELEASE HALF OF PRISON POPULATION

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED. PLEASE PROTECT ACCORDINGLY.

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) On November 21, an estimated 8,000 inmates nationwide ended their 18-day hunger strike against overcrowding in Greek prisons following GOG announcement that it would release almost half of Greece's prison population. Since November 3, the unrest in prison detention centers propelled supporting riots and arson attacks by sympathetic anarchists. The decision to conclude the strike came after the November 21 announcement by Justice Minister Hatzigakis of new measures for improving prison conditions, which provide for the gradual release of 5,500 inmates by April 2009 -- a step that will alleviate prison overcrowding, a persistent human rights concern. Given Greek law enforcement's weak record on penalizing violent anarchists, traffickers in persons, and corrupt officials, however, this prisoner release will likely further diminish the GOG's ability to deter crime. END SUMMARY.

PRISONER UNREST

¶2. (U) On Monday, November 3, inmates from all 21 Greek prisons launched a three-stage hunger strike in support of a 45-point reform agenda. Among their demands, the prisoners sought the abolition of juvenile prisons, an overall time reduction in sentencing, and greater freedoms. The total prison population in Greece is approximately 12,300 in penitentiaries meant to hold a maximum of 8,200.

¶3. (U) The first stage of the hunger strike campaign called for the refusal of food provided by the prison. Approximately 7,000 out of 12,300 inmates participated in the prison food boycott. U.S. Consular Officers on routine prison visits observed that despite the inmates' refusal to eat prison-catered food, most still had access to private sources of food.

¶4. (U) On Friday, November 7, approximately 1,000 inmates advanced to the second stage of the prisoners' campaign by going on a complete hunger strike. 17 of those prisoners stitched their mouths shut. By November 19 many detainees began to refuse water consumption as well. Several participants were hospitalized.

¶5. (SBU) The third stage of the campaign was a general prisoners' uprising, coordinated with sympathy protest marches throughout Greece. While no prison breakouts were reported, protest marches, concerts, and other events were held outside detention centers and in the streets of Greek's major cities. These protests were disquieting to the government, which -- according to recent polls -- was already facing a significant decrease in public support.

ANARCHIST INVOLVEMENT

¶6. (U) Numerous riots and arson attacks linked to anarchist groups occurred during the prisoners' hunger strike. One such group, the "Incendiary Committee of Solidarity for Detainees," claimed responsibility for attacking property owned by private security companies that work with the Ministry of Justice, with threats to cause further destruction. Between November 6-11, the "Incendiary Solidarity" group claimed responsibility for ten attacks. Other arson attacks and vehicle hijackings took place in central Athens and its surrounding regions. (COMMENT: The overlapping of the strike with the November 17 anniversary of the Athens Polytechnic uprising likely fueled heavy anarchist activity. END COMMENT)

MINISTRY OF JUSTICE'S RESPONSE: RELEASE PRISONERS

¶7. (U) On November 20, Justice Minister Hatzigakis met with opposition and NGO representatives to announce the government's response and plan for prison "reform." The most significant proposal was the planned release of 45 percent of Greece's prison population within the next five months. According to the new plan, 1,740 prisoners serving up to 5-year sentences would be released immediately if they met the conditions of the Penal Code. Additionally, nine prisoners would be released immediately due to critical health conditions. The new measures would also abolish juvenile prisons, accumulative disciplinary penalties, and

ATHENS 00001607 002 OF 002

the 18-month pre-trial detention for a large number of offenses. The proposed legislation, however, would not reduce sentences for inmates involved in drug smuggling or "gruesome" crimes.

¶8. (U) Justice Minister Hatzigakis sent the draft law to be tabled for Parliamentary approval. PASOK spokeswoman for domestic affairs Haris Kastanidis commented that the draft bill was inadequate and while it contained some positive measures, it didn't address the problem as a whole.

HUNGER STRIKE ENDS

¶9. (U) On November 20, the Committee of Prison Inmates announced that Friday, November 21 would mark the end of the prison hunger strike. While the committee commented that the draft law does little to cover the inmates' demands, they recognized the new measures as the "first step" to a resolution.

¶10. (SBU) COMMENT: While Hatzigakis' new measures will address prison overcrowding, an important human rights concern, the GOG "solution" of releasing nearly half of all those in prison creates as many if not more problems as it solves in a country already seen as weak on crime. The Embassy continues to reach out to Hellenic Police and Ministry of Justice interlocutors to press for new prison facilities, better inmate conditions, but also tough and fair convictions and sentences for corrupt officials, violent anarchists, and traffickers in persons. END COMMENT.

SPECKHARD